

When Newark Was Younger

ON May 27, 1943, a simple ceremony marked the wartime opening of the Centre Street Bridge, for vehicular traffic. Highway Commissioner Spencer Miller Jr. officiated, and Governor Charles Edison cut the ribbon to open the new route. At Thanksgiving time in 1932, the Viaduct, now known as the Pulaski Skyway, opened with a great fanfare, three New Jersey Governors, and three mayors being present, as well as many other dignitaries. When the Lincoln Highway was completed on the route of the Old Plank road, a memorable parade was held, with vehicles of every kind under the sun passing in review.

With this record of bridge and highway celebrations in honor of, and the opening of the splendid new Stickel Bridge taking place this month, it seems appropriate to recall the opening of Newark's first bridge across the Passaic in 1794.

IN 1794 Newark's first newspaper, Woods Newark Gazette, was full of news about the Newark Bridge and its construction, but nowhere in there any account of an opening celebration.

On Wednesday, December 31, 1794, the editor of the Gazette had this to say, "It is with pleasure we announce to the public that the commodious and elegant bridges over the rivers Passaic and Hackensack are nearly completed; the bridge over the Passaic is entirely so and the railing only is wanted to finish the other bridge; but as the bullestrades (sic) are erected, it is passed with carriages in perfect safety.

"These bridges are 18 feet in width and the footways five feet; the bridge over the Passaic is 492 feet in length and that over the Hackensack 860 feet.

"The causeway which is about three miles in length, connected with these bridges, is not entirely completed; it is, however, daily made use of by carriages. About three-fourths of its distance is, in part, graveled, and is an excellent road, supported by piles; it is 16 feet wide and elevated two feet above the



Pedestrian traffic predominated on Clay Street Bridge following its opening late in 1890. Overcrowding of Bridge street span made construction necessary.

surface of the meadow. It is expected the whole of the causeway will be so far finished as to receive the first coat of gravel in about two months. The expense of these bridges is about \$50,000. They do honor to this country, and we cannot, but with pleasing satisfaction, contemplate the great utility they will be to the public."

It was obvious that the bridge across the Passaic was so badly needed that its users could not wait for it to be

have crowded the bridge at times. Prices were set for sulkies, for "riding chairs," for coaches, post chaises, "pleasure shays," phaetons, and horse carts.

Sheep or hogs were charged at 5 cents for the dozen, horned cattle and horses 2 cents each. Rates were established for coaches pulled by as many as six horses, and for market wagons drawn by an equal number of oxen. In those days before railroads or

A drawing by an early 19th Century artist gives us some idea of how tiny and primitive the bridge was. Abutments were of stone, and the short spans were supported on spiles, according to the editor of the Gazette of April 13, 1796. The drawing shows the drawspan, a jack-knife wooden truss, with the bridge tender's house on the approach span adjoining the draw. This hand-operated drawbridge remained in use for almost 100 years, being renovated a foot at a time in the 1840s and enlarged to some extent. The structure was known simply as the Newark Bridge.

DISCUSSION of the need for a bridge began at least as early as 1790, and in November, 1791, the State Legislature passed an act authorizing the formation of a company for the construction of bridges over the Passaic and Hackensack rivers and for roads connecting them. Commissioners were appointed to oversee the work and to manage the lottery to raise \$5,000 which was authorized by the Legislature. The first volume of the Gazette is full of lottery notices. The drawing was held in three classes—with a top prize in the first class of \$3,000, and others of \$300, \$100, \$50, \$20, and many \$10 prizes. Since capital was scarce in the early years of the republic, lotteries were a favorite means of raising money for local improvements. Trinity Church received part of its building fund in this way as did the Court House and academy in Elizabethtown, and the Newark Academy as well.

The most ambitious lottery was that for \$100,000 to start the Society for the Establishing of Useful Manufactures, Alexander Hamilton's industrial scheme which led to the founding of Paterson. One suspects that lotteries became

City's Growth Started With Its Bridges; Lottery Launched First Passaic and Hackensack Spans

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completed or for an opening celebration to be held.

At a meeting of the stockholders on the last day of January, 1795, the rates of toll were set up, in "New York currency," and announced in the February 4 Gazette. A single person on foot paid 2 cents, as did a man on horseback, while a market wagon or sled with two horses and oxen and two persons paid 11 cents. The complete schedule of tolls gives a vivid picture of the heavy traffic that must

canals were built, horses, mules and oxen carried all freight that could not be shipped by water. What a sight it must have been when a heavily loaded oxcart, drawn by six great straining beasts came down the steep incline to the little wooden bridge across the river! Picture a herdboy struggling to drive several dozen stubborn hogs or 50 silly sheep onto the narrow span with its low railings, while the owner hurried to pay the toll.



Steam engine to operate swing type draw on Bridge street span was installed in early '90's, replacing manual operation of nearly 100 years. Closed since 1946, bridge will be razed within nine months after Stickel Bridge opening.

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(Cont'd from Previous Page)
so popular that they choked each other off, for the sale of the tickets for the third class of the Newark bridge lottery had in his postponed because the Elizabethan lottery intervened.

No sooner had the bridge over the Passaic at Newark been completed than the village of Belleville advertised a lottery to build a bridge, tickets for these lotteries were quite widely sold; those for the Newark bridge being available in Newark and at Paulus Hook, the point where travelers took the perambulator for New York. It was not long before an enterprising citizen of Newark, Stephen Merrill opened a special office for renewing and selling lottery tickets.

Once the drawings for the prizes had been held, in the summer of 1791, the commissioners organized and proceeded on February 14, 1793, to issue stock in the new enterprise. Sold out immediately at \$200 a share, the stock soon advanced \$30 in price. James Baldwin, the secretary, issued calls for stockholders meetings, announced in the Gazette and the commissioners engaged an engineer, Josiah Nottage, who had distinguished himself by building an elegant bridge over the Charles River near Boston. The stockholders of the bridge company were among Newark's most respected and influential men.

THEIR president, Isaac Gouverneur, was one of that well-to-do family whose home on the Passaic, called Mount Pleasant, was later frequented by Washington Irving, and called by him "Cock-hoff Hall." Uziel Ogden, the vice president, was rector of Trinity Church, and a prosperous farm owner; his father had acquired extensive mine properties in the North Jersey Hills before the Revolution. John Noble Cummings, the treasurer, was probably the most active and successful of them all. He had been surveyor and overseer of the highways, owner and operator of many stage



The Center Street Bridge was nearly carried away by flood waters of Passaic River in 1903. It was saved by running work and freight trains of Pennsylvania Railroad, then the owners, onto span to give it added weight and stability.

lines, and holder of a contract to carry the U. S. mail between New York and Philadelphia. Naturally he stood to gain much by the building of the bridge over the Passaic and the Hackensack.

Many of the stockholders and directors of the company which built the bridge and highway were also members of one of Newark's earliest civic associations, the "Patriotic Society of the Town of Newark for Promoting Objects of Public Utility." At each of its meetings some question of civic importance was debated, such as "Whether a fire engine or engines would not be of public utility," and "Whether the establishment of a female academy and boarding school would be expedient." Perhaps we should refer to them as Newark's earliest "Central Planning Board."

The Newark Bridge was constructed at a time when labor was scarce. The floods of immigration which made possible the building of our canals and railroads had not yet arrived. Many able-bodied men were away fighting in the Whisky Rebellion in Pennsylvania or in the Indian Wars along the Ohio frontier. The following advertisement appeared week after week in Wood's Newark Gazette: "Carpenters and laborers wanted at the Newark and Hackensack bridges. One dollar a day will be paid to carpenters and liberal wages to laborers." Many of the subscribers to the stock were encouraged to pay for it with labor rather than in cash.

On January 3, 1796, the commissioners for the causeways published an appeal "to the inhabitants of Newark, Orange, Walpershook (Bloomfield), Passaic River (Belleville), Passaic (Nutley) and New Barbadoes (Newark) stating that the Union for the causeway was laid on the bank of the Hackensack, ready to be conveyed from the swamp to the causeway. The commissioners invited residents to "afford your friendly assistance in this exertion with your team or otherwise. Liquor will be provided." Thus was completed this important link between the banks of the Passaic and the banks of the Hackensack and the Hudson.

The Newark Bridge remained the property of a private company until about 1872, when it was purchased by the counties of Essex and Hudson, each of which paid \$35,000. Since tolls were then abolished, and the cost carried by a bond issue, the bridge became known as the Free Bridge. In contrast to the bridge at the foot of Ferry street which was privately owned until the franchise of the Plank Road Company expired about 1890.

The Free Bridge, which was still a wooden structure when the freeholders took it over, was rebuilt in several stages between 1878 and 1881 and again in 1903. An iron draw, new stone piers, and a dredging of the channel were among the improvements. Use of the bridge was extremely heavy, and improvements were made piecemeal

as far as possible without interruption of service, at a heavy cost in money and attention from the Freeholders' Committee. At one time monthly committee meetings were held at the bridge!

WHEN the iron bridge at Clay street opened late in 1890, County Engineer James Owens wrote that it was the first channel for wagon or foot travel that had been opened across the Passaic River in at least 35 years. Although Mr. Owens had made extensive surveys of several sites, and the ultimate choice of the Clay street crossing had been made by the freeholders of both the counties involved, there was some criticism of the location by the citizens. Looking back on it today one wonders why, when there was no free bridge below the Bridge street crossing, the freeholders should have chosen to build a second bridge so near the first.

The extreme overcrowding of the Bridge Street Bridge with teams and cattle was the answer. It was made worse by the fact that the draw on the old bridge was still operated by hand. When the Clay Street Bridge with a steam-operated draw was opened, County Engineer Owens strongly recommended that the hand mechanism be replaced by a steam engine, as was done within a year or two.

The freeholders and their committee on free bridges, which had from 1872 supervised the Bridge street span, had even in 1890 discussed the need for a third bridge across the Passaic south of the Center street railroad crossing. In 1897 they opened the bridge at Jackson street, an iron structure with steam-operated draw. Meanwhile improvements to the Clay Street Bridge and continual repairs to the old "Free Bridge" kept them busy. Two years later they acquired the Plank Road and its bridge, and all the bridges in Newark were either city or county controlled. With the building of many lane highways, and increasing complexity of traffic, the need arose to have bridges taken over by the State Highway Department.



Opened in 1897, Jackson Street Bridge was the first free bridge to serve the heavily industrialized ironbound area. It leads to Fourth street in Harrison.